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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000127

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: LEBANESE ELECTIONS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, DCM, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Lebanese ambassador to the Holy See told Amb. Rooney September 11 that the Holy See values its contacts with the US but feels US should listen more closely to Vatican views. The recent visit of the Syrian deputy PM was mishandled by the Vatican, which failed to deliver a clear message. Patriarch Sfeir's recent visit to Rome was also uncomfortable; Sfeir knows his influence in Lebanon is limited. It is important for the USG to reach out to senior Vatican officials, primarily Cardinal Bertone and Archbishop Mamberti. The Holy See has good ties to Iran but has not yet acted diplomatically to build on those ties with regard to Lebanon. End summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Rooney discussed the current situation in Lebanon September 11 with Lebanese ambassador to the Holy See Naji Abi Assi (protect). DCM and Special Assistant also attended. Following are observations made by Abi Assi.

-- The Holy See sometimes complains that USG officials don't listen to it; but sometimes Holy See fails to say anything when it has the opportunity. He said he had heard that Cardinal Bertone appreciated his recent conversations with Secretary Rice and Under Secretary Burns.

-- Syrian deputy president Faruq al-Sharaa, who met the Pope September 5, went away satisfied because of the papal penchant to speak in general terms, which works in Syria's favor here. In this case, the Pope reportedly urged that "a president for all Lebanese" be found, but did not go into detail about what exactly that would mean, or how it would be done. Syria would be quite happy with a pro-Syrian president accepted by all Lebanese -- hence al-Sharaa's satisfaction at the meeting -- though the Holy See had intended rather to urge that the choice be left to Lebanese, i.e. that Syria and others should not interfere.

-- Patriarch Sfeir's visit last week was in fact arranged by the Lebanese ambassador to Italy, and Sfeir had not sought any Holy See meetings; this caused some friction with the Holy See when it learned of his visit (Vatican meetings did eventually occur). In Abi Assi's view, the Patriarch is relatively unable to influence events in Lebanon, and knows it; he is respected but not feared, and Christian factions feel free to ignore his pleas. Sfeir is still mistrustful of the U.S. because of some misunderstandings in the 1990s relating to proposed candidates for election to office in Lebanon. (Note: Abi Assi noted that although the Maronite Church is in full communion with Rome, it is self-governing -- in other words, the Patriarch cannot be dismissed and is essentially independent.)

-- According to Abi Assi, the USG should make a greater effort to reach out to Cardinal Bertone and Archbishop Mamberti, rather

than focusing on the Pope. The Holy See's small structure means that top officials rely heavily on individual experts to shape their policies; in this case, the key individual is Monsignor Franco Coppola (more or less equivalent to an office director), whose memos directly influence all his superiors. Coppola himself, though not openly anti-American, is very critical of the US role in the Middle East and repeatedly reminds listeners that President Bush should have listened to papal envoy Cardinal Pio Laghi, whom John Paul II had sent to Washington in 2003 to plead that the US avoid war in Iraq.

-- The Holy See maintains dialogue with Syria and Iran, and urges the US to do so too. Iran places much value on its relationship with the Vatican, has a significant presence here, and maintains a vigorous dialogue with the Holy See. The Holy See has not, however, taken the initiative with either Syria or Iran to seek solutions to any of the regional problems involving those countries. In the case of Lebanon, Abi Assi is certain that both Syria and Iran are acting from self-interest rather than ideology, and therefore are potentially open to other courses of action.

-- Until now, Mamberti has been continuously feeling his way and no clear policy has evolved. One day soon, however, Mamberti will advise Bertone clearly of his position, and then Holy See policy will be fixed. So, according to Abi Assi, we should act now to influence Mamberti.

-- Michel Aoun has power to block any president in Lebanon.

-- Papal Nuncio Gatti is an expert on Lebanon but is worn out, not active; however, no sign that he will be replaced.

-- The most successful Holy See role in Lebanon will not be direct (as in uniting Christians or persuading Sfeir) but rather through influence with Lebanon's neighbors.

-- Abi Assi had high praise for French Middle East envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran.

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¶3. (C) Comment: we have found Amb. Abi Assi to be consistently well informed and active. In particular we would agree on the need for us to focus on Mamberti in the near future, as his influence on the Holy See's approach to Lebanon will continue to be very strong.  
ROONEY